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JOHN V. A. WEAVER

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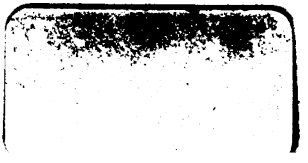

Margey Wins the Game

BY JOHN V. A. WEAVER

IN AMERICAN

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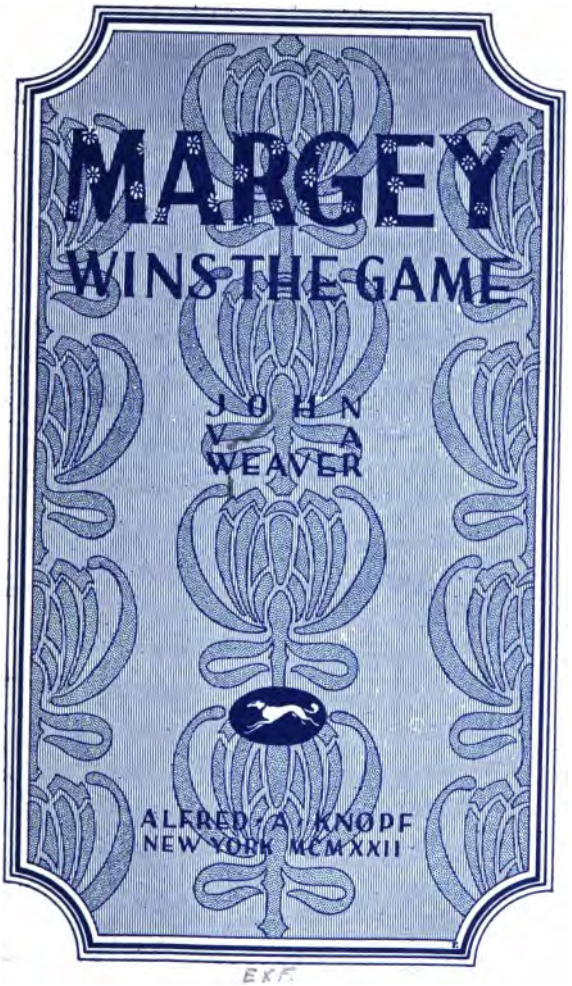
MARGEY
WINS THE GAME
JOHN
V. A.
WEAVER
ALFRED · A · KNOPF
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To the Gang

Burry, Dixon, Marshall, Bentley, Williams Rend, Ware, and Carpenter, were it not for whose activities and conversations this story would never have been conceived or executed: scattered, but in my heart intact.

Williams & Norgate, May 1939

Margey Wins the Game

I

"WHY don't you get some dope on yourself? Don't be a dumb-bell all your life!"

That was the speech that put the T N T under Marge. Pretty curt stuff, I guess, but that's the way brothers talk to sisters in real life, and I want to tell you right here that "Realism" is my middle name, and what I'm going to give you is straight. You tell 'em Dostoievsky.

I'm getting awfully weary of all these bogus yarns about society, where everybody pulls Shakespeare or Eddie Cantor in every line. I've listened for some years to miles of tea-chatter and dance-floor comedy, and I hope to wear spats if I ever heard conversation that wouldn't

discredit a shell-shock ward. At any rate in the "younger set."

Thank the Lord, I'm thoroughly through with that "younger set" stuff. And all of this playing around, too, for that matter. I've had more than enough. I'm settling down. I'm going to be a writer, and anyone knows you can't create masterpieces unless you lay off the song-and-dance, and bid good-by to Ethyl. Maybe I could continue my loose ways by selling bonds . . . that's the way Brock and most of these other parlor-pythons get by. And, of course, there's always Dad's sinecure, whatever that means. But I'm going to make some sort of name for myself—who wouldn't, if "Souse" Baker was his old one?

A name like that cramps one's style. And it isn't helped any by the fact that everybody in Dearborn knows I was fired from nine—count 'em—nine prep schools

before Hogstroms finally eased me in at New Haven; and when you consider that three separate and distinct freshman classes passed on to higher academic glories minus my cheerful face—well, you begin to understand. Two short weeks ago I received my travel orders for the final time. Dad has now ceased foaming at the mouth, and consents to allow me enough for rolls and coffee during one year of experimentation. So here I am, a budding realist.

Perhaps you think all this Margot Asquith is irrelevant? Aha! That's part of my technique, you see? By now you must be fairly convinced of my qualifications for writing about society. And when I reveal to you that Dad is *the* Baker—soap—do you commence to realize? Why, *his* father had money even. Oh, there's no denying it, mine is one of the First Families of Dearborn, and I

write with full authenticity, as the reviewers will say.

But, returning to Marge, her brother Brock's attitude was ridiculous. True enough, it was taking rather a chance to cut-in on her. And then, that fresh young Williams called her "The Tangle-foot Kid"—and you know how a name like that gets about. The name applied mostly to her propensity for getting stuck; as for actual foot-work, she was about average.

Marge herself wasn't average—not by a flaskfull. She's a sort of eighth cousin of mine, and her mother was a Boston Somers. You know what that means. Flocks of position and cash. And her old man always gave at least two very creditable parties each year. By all the rules, Marge should have had a tremendous time. Brock stated the situation very well—I'll admit that, even though I

didn't have much sympathy with his views.

"What makes me so confounded sore," he continued, "is that you don't seem to care. That's the whole trouble, Marge. You started off fine last year; then you didn't go so big toward the end. Last summer you got lost out because you would go up to the woods for two whole months, with that reading and other truck, instead of sticking around and having people up for week-ends once in a while. You were a total stranger in Lake's End. No wonder you're beginning to hug the wall like the well-known rain-pipe."

Marge, Brock and I were lolling around their kitchen, grabbing a shredded wheat after the second "Cinderella" dance. I was getting tired of all that talk, so I spoke up.

"Oh, lay off, Brock. You're a knock-

out, you are. Margey's a darn sweet kid, and I like her the way she is."

Brock gave me a dirty look. "Say, where do you fit? You don't have to suffer the way I do. I'm sick and tired of being the World's Greatest Rescue Crew. I have other plans at dances besides wearing the old eye out keeping it on Marge."

"Well," I answered, "you could do worse things with your eye than keep it on Marge. Every time I look at her I get a large kick."

Brocks voice rose to an angry squawk. "That's what makes me so mad! Can't you get that through your dome? Here I've got a sister who's at least presentable, and what does she do? Sits around like a namby-pamby—no pep—reads all the time—treats everybody as if they were so many old shoes—and they call her 'The Tangle-foot Kid.' Hell!"

Marge didn't say anything, but her big

brown eyes forecasted "cloudy, with probable showers."

I began to be sore. "Pipe down, Brock!" I said. "Leave her alone. Don't you let him hurt you, Marge. You're the prettiest kid in town, and you've got it over these dancing canaries like a tent. Stay the way you are. Who cares, anyway?"

Brock flung his hat in the sink. "I care—that's who. I'm not going to have my sister a joke." He walked over to her. "Play the game! Snap out of yourself! Put some life into your work!"

I broke in. "The deuce with the game, Marge. You're slick the way you are. Absolutely the only girl I ever saw who keeps a mind. What if the goofers don't cut-in? Being stuck with you is a pleasure. I get more ideas hearing you talk about books and art and music and all that, than any Prof. I ever saw could give me. Brock's a poor sap."

Brock turned a lovely mauve. He dived his hand into his pocket, and hauled out a piece of paper.

"I am, am I? All right. I'm through —absolutely, positively and completely through. You can take charge of her, if you're so smart. Read that and weep."

He flung a piece of paper into Marge's lap, and marched out.

Marge looked the clipping over and handed it to me. She was biting her lower lip and trying not to cry. It was a rotten shame, the poor kid.

I recognized immediately the familiar style of "About Town." Oh yes, it's familiar enough—I used to receive a weekly raspberry in their columns. And you know how everybody reads it. They all protest loudly—fling around adjectives like "contemptible"—"scurrilous"—and all that; but just the same they never fail to know the nasty little digs their friends have been getting.

And this is about what was regaling the gang.

"It's really too bad about dear Little Margey Ransom. At the first Cinderella, she spent most of her time sitting alone in the dressing room. The ill-mannered cubs of this social generation have little appreciation for true refinement. Janey Somer's daughter a wall flower! It's really too depressing. Well, *autres temps, autres moeurs.* It's mostly her own fault, I suspect, for not insisting upon a formal début last year. I have been told that she refused the usual press-agenting, and preferred to—'ooze' out—I believe the process is disgustingly called. The fact remains that she is most unpopular. Perhaps she should give up all together, and retiring to her reading, and all that.

This social whirl is no place for the shy and—shall I say—over-finicking?"

I tore the thing into bits, and walked over to Marge's chair. She looked up,

and the showers had retired, giving away to a fine exhibition of heat lightning. "Whoa," I said, "don't take it out on me, Marge. I didn't write it."

Marge smiled grimly. "Don't be an idiot, Larry." (That was another thing I liked about Marge; she never used "Souse"—it was always "Larry"; in fact she invented "Literary Larry," which I hope sticks, and why shouldn't it, because —but never mind, we'll see.) And then she stamped on the floor, and announced, "That settles it."

"Settles what?" I asked. But I knew, all right. A sad thing was about to happen. A very sweet, very shy, very real little girl was about to get hard-boiled.

I put all the pleading possible into my voice.

"Margey, darling child, don't pay any attention to these fish. Leave the game alone. It's not worth it for a second."

Margey smiled sourly, and patted my hand. "Shut up, Larry dear. Now, answer me a few questions. First, am I truly pretty?"

"Hades, yes," I answered.

"But not conspicuously so?" she pressed.

"Delicacy—refinement—"

Margey stopped me. "Sufficient. No pep—that's what you mean. All right. I know how to fix that. Now. Can I count on you?"

"To the last encore."

"Fine. And—er—one last thing—you aren't in love with me?"

Naturally I wasn't—my own cousin? How could she flatter herself? A very nice child, that's what she was, but love—well, no matter.

So of course I answered up, "Yes, Margey, I am. Quite badly, too."

Margey smiled. "I'm awfully glad

you aren't. Because it ought to be much easier to pretend."

"Pretend!" and my voice sounded effectively shocked.

"Yes, Larry. That's all I want for a starter. Just pretend for a little while, and then I won't need you any more. You see, I have a plan. I'm going to play the game, and I'm going to win it. And you're going to be used—see?"

I dropped the kidding, and took hold of both her hands, and looked deep into her eyes. "Marge, for the last time I beg you. Can this stuff. You can count on me, as I told you. But can it—it isn't worth it."

Marge looked away. "You promised. Maybe it's not—but just the same, I'm going to play it and see. So—here's the general theme. Pay attention."

I sat down. And you'll find out soon enough how much dope Margey really had.

This is a dirty trick known as suspense —but if I am ever to exchange that name "Souse" for "Literary Larry," I'll have to use all the feeble information I ever extracted from English 1—a, b and c.

For the next two weeks, Marge regretted every invitation. This was wise, because her dancing had to be whipped into shape. Every afternoon I gave her one half-hour of my invaluable time, trying to get her to shake her feet as if she meant it, not from duty. "Just give in, let the old jazz get into your blood, and nature will do the rest"—that was my only instruction, and you'd be surprised—

There was no half-way business about any of Margey's preparations, either, confound her. She dropped her sculping at the Art Institute, and she never opened a book— "Beautiful things make you soft, Larry, and I've got to build an armor-plate." She bought all the numbers of *Harper's Bazar* and *Vanity Fair* for a

year back and studied them carefully, developing thereby a line that consisted of smart remarks on every subject from plays to Paquin—hollow, but amazingly pat—wit for every emergency.

Meanwhile she was dashing around from one dressmaker to another—mysterious stuff, and expensive, I'll bet: I put in a mild protest; she told me it was none of my business, that her allowance had been piling up for two years, and that her Dad didn't care how she spent it. If her mother had been alive, there'd have been a different story—rather, there wouldn't have been a story at all, because no "game" would have been necessary. Her Dad, dear old bird, spent all his time (except about three hours of the day at the office) sleeping either in bed or in one of those mushy-looking armchairs facing the boulevard windows of our exclusive mausoleum, the Dearborn Club. Brock asked questions, but when I told him that Mar-

gey was preparing to knock the snakes for a goal, he let out three rapid, piercing cheers and went to New Haven, ostensibly to see the game, but—well, anyway, the bond buyers had to get along without Brock for a month.

II

THE De Wilk's *Bal Masque* came a couple of days before Thanksgiving. It was the first big blowout of the season, and the old Wycherly was packed.

The time was the celebrated magic hour of midnight, when a distinct lull is always perceptible. The petters were hesitating; should they chance a brief slink-up to the nooks on the back stairs, or ought they to hang around the supper-room and secure decent tables? The stags were half through the process of drinking their fill, cutting-in was slack, cutting-up was becoming rather a bore, and everybody was trying to figure out just who three or four unidentified maskers could be. At that moment entered myself, accompanied by one of the cutest spectacles

those crystal chandeliers ever hung above.

The whole effect, as Madame Q's column might say, was "daringly demure" —sophisticated naïveté, or words and music to that effect. The spectacle's skirt was 1860, modified—sort of demi-crinoline, if you get what I mean, and just short enough to be not-too-short. Tight bodice, or whatever you call it, and then the loveliest arms, back, neck and shoulders, all in their proper places. That's all I remember, except that the dress was peach-colored, and the lady's hair, in contrast with all the covered ears and bobbed shocks, was up on top of her head, the way you see it in daguerreotypes, and there was one little ringlet athwart each ear. Her mask was carefully put on, so that, with all the other innovations, I wouldn't have known her myself if I hadn't been a fellow-conspirator.

I danced her once around the stag-line, which was, as usual, jammed into the

middle of the room. Half-way round, I saw a temporary colored gentleman taking a surreptitious swig out of the patent flask which he carried concealed in his left coat sleeve. His gesture revealed to me at once that he was Bill Thompson, our city's original Debs' Delight, whose judgment even the most conscious man-about-town respected. I steered my partner toward him and trod carefully upon his toe. He whirled around abruptly, spluttering. Then he clapped his hand to his head and stared.

"Great Lord and Taylor!" he shouted, and six couples in his vicinity, in their curiosity, collided.

He dashed up to us. "May I—"

"Get the gate," I said at once. "Nobody cuts in this dance."

Bill seized my arm and tried to pry me away. "How do you get that way, you egg?" he muttered. "Miss—eh—Miss—eh—"

Margey shook her head. I wrenched away, and snaked her behind a providential fat couple. Bill was caught in a jam of dancers.

And just at that moment there stalked up to us who but "The Dook" himself—Jim Stanton, the city's best matrimonial bet. Tall, blond, manly and oh, so different—the difference being that on account of his acknowledged super-eligibility, he always pulls a line of the most patronizing rudeness. His people have had so much money for so long that they don't even bother to talk about it—some record for our city. Not half as stuck-up as you might expect, either, considering how any sweet young thing shivers with delight at his smallest insult.

He didn't even bother to ask—just started to brush me aside. I dodged Margey away.

"Nothing stirring, Jim," I said kindly.

He gave me an amazed imitation of the

dear old game, "Still-Pond—No More-Moving."

"Sorry," I went on. "Lady has a cold, so I'm talking for her. Any cut-ins?"

Margey shook her head again.

"See?" I finished triumphantly. Jim gulped twice—and we were out of danger. That is, from Jim. But before we reached a strategic position opposite the door, I had collected two promises of punches in the eye and five muttered epithets.

I took a hasty glance around. Jim and Bill were talking animatedly, favoring us with nasty and threatening glares. They linked arms, and started towards us, being joined immediately by three other annoyed young men.

"Ready?" I whispered to Marge.

She whispered "Yes," and with that we made a break for the door. Then down the back stairs, and out the side door, and into Margey's car, where we had parked

our coats, anticipating just such an emergency.

Margey tore off her mask. Her eyes were dancing.

"Success?" she asked, as Jacques stepped on it.

"Oh, Papa!" I said. "Beats the schedule fifty blocks. Curiosity—excitement—! Say, those birds won't get over talking about this for a week."

"Do you think they're angry?" and Margey caught her breath.

"Angry! Telling the great Dook to hit the air?"

"But you think—"

"Think? I know. My child, next week's trunk murder mystery will be tit-tat-toe compared with the curiosity you stirred up to-night."

Marge grinned in silence until we were at her door.

III

It was pretty fortunate for me that I had accepted an invitation to go hunting for the next week. I left early the following morning for a club down in the wilds of the Mississippi flats, where I acquired much health pursuing the nimble duck. It was obvious that I would have had some very unpleasant encounters with disappointed cutters-in.

As it was, I didn't see anybody except Marge, and that was on the afternoon of my return. Instalment two of our conspiracy was planned for that night. She told me that some of the girls had been over, very suspicious, and plying her with questions as to why she stayed away from all the parties. Marge's answer to all inquiries was that "she was sick of being one of the flowers that bloom near the palms, tra-la," or something like that.

They were full of guesses about the sensational lady of mystery—and every time they said anything they fixed Marge with an accusatory look.

"Honestly, Larry, I can't hide things any longer," Marge wound up. "I don't think anyone has very definite ideas, but some are on the trail. We'll have to make the revelation to-night."

"All right," I answered. "The stage is set. Now for the big scene."

So that evening, just as the clock struck twelve, I steered into the Wycherly ballroom the same charming spectacle that had intrigued the gang one week before. Identical peach-colored demi-crinoline, ringlets and all—only minus the disguising mask.

Well, there's no denying it, it was a sensation. I may even say that half the people in the room stopped dancing, and craned their necks. There was a sharp pause in the shuffling.

Bill Thompson pushed through the stags. It was evident that he was so intent upon snatching the lady away from me that he hadn't recognized her as yet. I kept her back toward him. Sure enough, he bounced up. I released her to him at once, and fled.

I must say, Bill was an ace. Never a flicker of astonishment, never a sign that he felt he'd been roped in. Marge said he started dancing with tremendous gusto, and said in a voice that carried twenty couples away, "Marge, you're certainly there. Never fooled me for a minute."

That was white of him, eh? And, of course, having once started that line, he was bound to hold to it; he had committed himself to giving Marge a whirl, and I knew I could count on him for at least a week.

Then I pulled a bit of cagey work myself. I hustled over to the corner, and parked myself next to the leader

of the Nebraska Glee Club.

Now, of course, this isn't really any Glee Club. But there is a gang of young climbers who stick together for purposes of social campaigning. They number about twelve, and they are either recent arrivals in Dearborn, who came without much introduction and started by edging in on one or two dances, and then called faithfully on all the debs, or else they are South Siders who have forsworn their accustomed haunts and companions, and are on the make. You know how any Glee Club is looked upon, generally. And you can imagine a Nebraska University Glee Club—well, it's just a term, but it's really most effective. These birds always overdo things—they wear their black ties tucked under their collars, they used to sport the accordion dress-shirts—all those little pieces of ultra-stuff which are the earmarks of the Blacksmith. But they do their duty-dances disgustingly faith-

fully, they talk blah-blah to the chaperons, and they will truckle to almost anyone, if they think they're making social capital thereby.

Marge had always treated the Nebraskans with the utmost contempt. But I had a very good scheme. As you know, men are decidely sheep-like. If a girl is getting a rush, and you can't take more than a couple of steps with her, hardly anybody stops to consider the quality of the rushers. All that is noticed is the quantity. I had Marge's promise that she would be decent even to Nebraskans. So I put on a ferocious glare, and began muttering to myself.

Frank Considine, the Nebraskan leader looked around.

"What's your sob story, Souse?" he asked.

I winced at the "Souse." But I swallowed the wrath.

"It's that confounded Bill Thompson.

Why can't he leave my girl alone?"

Franky perked up. "Your girl? Who, the renovated Marge?"

"Certainly," I answered. "He won't leave me alone with her a second. The other night he got sore because I wouldn't let him cut in, and here he grabs her first thing."

Frank looked incredulous. "You mean to say the great Bill is falling for Marge? Why, only last week he told me that when it came to dancing she was the supreme gloom!"

I indicated the two of them. "Look for yourself." Bill was whispering in Marge's ear—one of the first tricks of his technique.

"Cut in on Bill, will you, Frank? I can't cut back, and I want to make this dance at least a two-step."

Frank hesitated. Just at that moment Bill laughed hugely as Marge smiled up at him. This was too much for Frank.

He sailed over to Marge. I let him

get once around, and cut. Over Marge's shoulder, I watched him dash back to his cohorts. There was a brief consultation. Then Oldsworth Tripp, the second most noted Nebraskan, presented himself.

I rejoined Frank, who was stroking his chin in perplexity.

"How do you get that way?" I inquired with just enough wrath. "Did you send Tripp in there to cut?"

Frank grinned smugly. "Maybe I did. Who gave you the earth, anyway?"

He caught my arm. "Listen—when is the big dinner she's giving?"

So—Marge was using her head. She knew the way to this type's good graces. A very good stroke. The kid was clever, all right.

"Oh, in a couple of weeks, I guess," I answered carelessly. And made for the smoking-room. Frank was on his way to cut again. I fear I startled old Mr.

Brady almost sober by turning a complete handspring on the lounge.

Bill Thompson looked in, and slouched over to me. He stood looking down, with a quizzical air.

"You're there," he announced finally. "That was a darn good stunt, Souse."

"What stunt?" I asked innocently.

Bill smiled. "Never mind. I'll say this, though. She's not three-quarters bad. I guess I must have overlooked something this last year."

I put it up to him with no kidding. "Bill, she's a pretty cute kid, isn't she?"

Bill started out the door. He stuck his head back and said, "You said it. If you think you've got any inside track, you better think some more. See?"

Well, I couldn't have asked for more than that, could I? But there was still the Dook to hear from. Where could he be?

I picked up my coat, and proceeded to

the Lafolette for liquid cheer. There was a large flock gathered round the center table when I got there, among them at least three who had received throw-downs the week before, at the mask affair.

Apparently none of them had been in the ballroom since early in the evening, because almost in chorus they demanded to be told the identity of my mysterious vamp.

I told them they'd find out, quickly enough.

"I know who she is, all right,'" announced one, leering. "Gee, you've got a nerve. I'll bet that's the first time any Follies star ever horned in on a Wycherly party."

I had to laugh. "You flatter me," I answered. Just then the Dook strolled in.

"Nice fellow!" he said.

"Listen, Jim," I answered, "I'm awfully sorry about the other night. But

honestly, I wanted her all to myself. And I'll tell you what I'll do. Just to prove I'm a white man, I'll make up for it by giving you the supper-dance."

"When? To-night? Is she up there?"

"She is. Do you want her?"

"Sure!"

"All right. How's for looping back there? Supper must be about on."

All the way over, he kept trying to pry her name out of me. I simply warned him that he was going to get a jolt.

As we shed our coats, I looked him right in the eye.

"Now listen, Jim. You're sure you want to go through with this? You think she's cute enough, no matter who she may be?"

Jim did something like smirk. "I don't get fooled often. If it hadn't been for the masks, I'd say I never saw a nicer looking girl in my life. What're you trying to do?"

"Well come here. Point your eyes over to that corner. Now speak up."

He gazed along the given line, and then he turned back to me. His eyes had a good-natured blink.

"Why, it's young Margey Ransom!" he said. "At least, it was."

"*Was* is the word. Oh, you're sober, all right. What you say?"

He slapped me on the back. While I was recovering my breath, he kept muttering, "I'll be switched. Ain't nature wonderful?"

Then he grabbed my arm. "Let's go," he said, dragging me Margeyward.

Bill Thompson rose to his feet with reluctance.

"Phone call for Mr. Thompson," I shouted cheerily. "Marge, you probably know Jim Stanton,"

Marge smiled calmly. "I think everyone does."

Jim was looking her up and down, grinning. "You're excused, Souse."

I hurried away. As Marge followed with Jim, he sprung a line that startled me beyond all bounds, it was so far from his usual casual insults.

"Where have you been all my life?"

I knew right there that Marge was off to a flying start. So back to the Lafollette I went and hung around, talking with a bunch of the stags.

And suddenly the room was crowded. The dance was over, and the mob was in for farewell libations. Bill came over to me.

"A fine oil can you turned out to be," he said. "Have you been here all this time?"

"Sure," I answered. "Where's Marge?"

Two or three of them howled. "Where do you suppose? Gone home, right after supper,"

"Who did she go home with? Jim?"

"That's the big joke. She turned him down cold. Went alone. You should have seen Jim's face. Oh, that kid's a corker."

Good for Marge! Playing the game like a prom-veteran. "Slick stuff," I agreed.

We piled into a taxi, and sped homeward. All the way I kept thinking about Marge. They all said she was off me a mile for deserting her. I wondered. But what of it, anyway? I was only a tool, after all. I didn't care anything about her, did I?

Did I?

"Great Lord," I said to myself, "this won't do. Larry, you egg, Marge is your cousin."

"Only seventh or eighth cousin," myself answered.

"True enough. But you had every

opportunity to capture her, all these years, and you never raised a hand."

"Yes, but she's a changed girl now."

"Why, you great fool, you know its all artificial. This remodeled Marge is a lot your own work."

"Well I can't help it. She's a knock-out. By George, am I falling for her?"

I was aroused from this furious soliloquy by the stopping of the taxi.

"Get out, stupid" yawned Bill. "And say, we have a new rival in the field for the fair Marge."

I jumped. "Who?"

"The Plumber."

"You mean that silent bird, always slinking around every week-end?"

"The same. He was a regular pest. I wanted to strong-arm him. Cut in every other second. Ought to warn Marge to lay off him. I made a couple of nasty remarks about him, but she was

polite; treated him like a human being. Well, s'long."

When I had dived in bed, I made plans for the elimination of the Plumber. Darling little Marge! What a howling success she was going to be—

Success! . . . The devil! . . . Ought to eliminate all of them—all . . . Bill, Jim—Nebraskans . . . Game . . . All foolishness . . . Saw her first . . . Inside track . . . Have her all myself . . . Darling little Marge . . . Darling . . .

IV

I DIDN'T get a chance to see Marge for the next week. Every time I called her up she had just stepped out somewhere. I couldn't tell what was the matter; whether she was off me for eternity on account of my missing taking her home, or whether I had made her so popular that I was now reduced to the position of cheer-leader.

However, Bill came over one night that I didn't have something on the regular calendar, and dragged me to the Casino, where they were having the first nocturnal skating-fest of the season.

Bill and I planted ourselves firmly on a bench from which we could observe the numerous gyrations. I'm not any male Charlotte myself, and I think Charlie Chaplin does his falls much more pictur-

esquely. Besides, he gets money for it. I kept peering about for a sight of Marge.

It's a good rink they have there. The tennis courts are surrounded by nice trim little cedars, giving the tasty effect of the country surrounding a Noah's ark. The moon was beaming unctuously—that's probably the wrong word, but it has a smooth sound—so that the whole effect was unlife-like and decidely toy-like. The nearest approach to any animals, however, were the porcine figures of Colonel Kembie and his mate, who were doing inside-outs, and outside-ins, or whatever you call them, over in a corner. I gave you my word, they reminded me every minute, with their dainty hooves, of dressed-up trick pigs. It was even funnier because the Colonel got his title as an inspector of Mr. Armour's products in the Q. M. department, during the late unpleasantness.

Barring that somewhat jarring demonstration, the scene was really good stuff. A great many of the gang, both masculine and feminine, were gliding around to the music of a grind-organ. However, I had no eyes for the scenery. I wanted Marge. And after a while, up she came all right, skating furiously, pursued by three panting Nebraskans and the Dook. She wasn't playing any favorites that evening, anyway. She wasn't getting a chance to. I jumped to my feet, tottered across two yards of ice,—and picked myself up again. Marge rushed to my rescue, and led me back to the bench.

I was grateful, and said so.

"Thanks a lot, Marge. I suppose it was the shock of seeing you that did it. Can't you sit down a second? I want to see how many years older you look since last I gazed upon you."

I gave her a good long once-over. I

tried to tell her what I thought. I couldn't do it. I just whistled.

"Well, you *are* interesting," said Marge. "Bill, can't you give Larry a drink or something? He's still dazed by his fall I think."

Bill was only too glad to horn in on me. But I found my tongue, all right. "Outside, Bill. Give me just ten minutes." Bill grinned and started for the clubhouse. Then I turned to Marge.

"No, it isn't the fall I got on the ice, Margey, and I won't tell you what fall it is. I'm just that subtle. You're wonderful! You're the Darbs! Where did you get that skating costume?"

"Like it?" said Marge, and twirled around, turning a couple of circles so that I could get a complete view.

Like it! I had to hand it to her. You know those illustrations of old fashion skating girls in the Godey's Books?

Well, Mr. Godey would have passed out with joy if he could have had her for a model. It was a wine-colored 1880-looking affair, edged with grey fur and she had a little red cap like a pile of wheat-cakes, stuck slant-wise on her head. I groaned inwardly. Great Lord! What a blind goofer I had been, only one short month before.

In desperation I dragged her down beside me. "Look here, Marge, you're not sore at me are you? About ditching you the other night, I mean?"

Marge smiled demurely. "Oh, did you ditch me?"

A handsome blush mounted to my brow. "Why—er—oh—let it go. I mean I didn't turn up. I suppose you'll say now, 'Oh, didn't you?' Well I didn't, and you know I didn't, and I hope darn well you're sorry I didn't, or mad, and please don't be, because—"

Marge gave me one of those sweet smiles which have razor-edges. "You're more than forgiven, Larry. After all, you did much more than your share to get me started on my social uplift. I'm so grateful to you. It isn't as if you were in love with me, you know."

Tie that, will you, sergeant? Sour grapes and ashes, as Daisy Ashford remarked.

"Now look here, Marge," I began. But I stopped. I had been too counfounded clever altogether. Why had I been so earnest that first time, trying to convince her of my impregnability to her charms? How on earth could I ever get started on a new track now? Once more I felt like a new boy in front of the football captain. She certainly put me in knickers.

Marge got tired of my inarticulateness (Whew) and started digging the ice with

her foot. I was just getting a wonderful line all wound up ready to sling at her, when, of course, Bill had to bounce up again, arrayed this time in skates.

"Margey, dear—" I got that far, and found her mysteriously wafted away from me. Bill, the poor egg, was skating her 'round and 'round. So that was that.

Well, it was punk fun freezing my feet just for a fugitive glimpse of Marge once in a while. I loped back to the club house, where I found a neat bone-galloping séance in progress. My luck with the little leapers certainly boded ill for my luck with Marge. By the time the grind organ had ceased its manipulations, my pockets looked like second helpings of romaine.

I was so engrossed in collecting Uncle Sam's groceries, that I didn't hear the first part of a wonderful conversation, which started back of me. A low,

ambling voice was intoning an endless monologue, entitled: "How I Play Winning Polo." Jack Forrest, as usual. It annoyed me. I couldn't concentrate on snapping my fingers. When my left ear had gathered the details of the seventh goal which he had shot against Kansas City that August, it was too much. He was just working into a good pace, and I recalled that there were four other matches later in the season, all of which would have to be re-played vocally. I looked around with one of the dirtiest glares I could muster, and saw the audience of this long harangue. It was Marge.

I walked around to the opposite side of the circle, thus completely ruining my luck, as it turned out, for I forgot to fade anybody, lost as I was in a study of how she put over her work.

Her weapon was the oldest trick in the

world—and the most effective—sympathetic listening. There she sat, curled up on the divan, her eyes apparently popping out with excited interest. Every now and then she would close those eyes tight, and then open them quickly, very wide, giving the impression of amazement at these wonderful exploits. Oh, the girl was good, there's no doubt about it. Whenever Jack showed any signs of tiring—and I must say he didn't show many—she would encourage him with a "Yes, and then what did you do?"—or some such feeder, and off he would go, at full gallop. It's as old as the lake itself, that game, and it's victims' last name is Legion. I'll bet Helen used to get that man Paris raving about how he threw down Minerva on account of Aphrodite; and I suppose Eve used to sit in rapt silence every evening while Adam told her how many new creatures he had named

since breakfast and the reasons for each name. The way to a man's heart is through his egotism, saith the Prophet.

Jack finally got to that magnificent back-hand wallop which saved the day against Fort Sherman, when I found myself thoroughly separated from all my dividends. I dusted off my knees. I walked deliberately over and sat down on Jack's hand. I, too, started a rapt listening-in. He began to get nervous. Marge was serene. Finally, when he had started another canter down the field, he gave a quick glance at me, and discovered that my jaw was dropping with a careful expression of amazement. He cast a verbal shoe. I could read in his face the mental stabling of his ponies for the night. He coughed a couple of times, then got up and said, "Well, good night Marge, see you to-morrow night. Same to you, Souse." He put a little extra

emphasis on the name, I thought. However, I had accomplished my fell design as dear old Nick Carter used to say.

Marge made no comment.

I grinned. "Well, Marge, aren't you going to say it?"

"Say what?"

"Say 'thank you.'"

Marge gave me another of those nasty, sweet little smiles. "But why? Jack is very—attentive, shall I say?"

There you are. What can you do against a girl like that? She always kicked the ground right out from under me.

"Marge, you've got me all wrong. I'm a liar, Marge. I was a liar way back there that first time we talked about the Game. I said I didn't care anything about you. But I do."

Margey lowered her eyes with a fiendish imitation of modesty. "Larry, you're

so flattering. All you boys say such nice things to me."

I squirmed—I guess that's the word for it. "Hang it, don't pull those little wiles on me. You know it isn't necessary. If you think you have to vamp me, think again. I'm your victim, Marge."

Marge never blinked. "Why Larry! I do believe you're flirting with me! And you're so good at it too! Think of all the practice you've had!"

I grasped Marge by the shoulder and wrenched her around facing me. "Say, Marge, will you cut that stuff? I know I've let myself in for all this kidding. I know I acted like a smart aleck at first. I was a fish. I want to start all over. Listen, Marge, I'm absolutely gone on you." I tried to fix her eye. She simply would not look straight at me.

There was a steady silence for about half a minute. Marge kept chuckling to

herself. I suppose I looked the complete jackass. For just a second she almost turned serious. Then the corners of her absolutely unbeatable mouth turned up, and I knew it was all off.

"Oh Larry,' she giggled, "you're such an expert in snaking, aren't you? Just think how you've helped me."

I gave up. I had to laugh myself. She certainly had me backed into a blind alley, and my nose was up against the well-known brick wall. Hornswoggled, held off at the end of a ten-foot pole, and by the product of my own cleverness!

I just sat there, and when "Funny" Wilkins came up, with a sheet of music paper in his hand, I gave him the floor without a struggle. As I drifted towards the bar, I heard him starting in on his musical act entitled: "Diminished Sevenths and Pink Intervals in the Compositions of Debussy, Ravel, and Myself."

Margey was curled up once more, her eyes wide with interest. Again she blinked, again she stared at the narrator with girlish worship.

And I had tried to give her dope on herself! As I passed by the fire I heard Jack Forrest talking to the Plumber.

"—best conversationalist in town, by golly," I heard him say, "Listen to this. I told her she danced so differently from the way she used to. She said, 'Yes, I used to be an indifferent dancer, didn't I?' . . . 'Indifferent—how do you mean?' I asked her. Then she puts on the most innocent look, and said, 'Why—neither with you nor against you!' . . . Wow!"

She got my vote.

V

So the season went on. Christmas came and departed. Marge finally quit kidding me, but I was still E. Pluribus Unum, although one of the closer competitors. And actually I did make a lot of progress, she treated me awfully well. Her head didn't appear to be turned, in spite of the mob that followed her.

I decided finally, that I was strongly entrenched enough to try out a little elimination of rivals.

The day after Christmas I called for her in my hack . . . . a punk little four-year-old Mercer—and we wheezed up to the Whip and Whistle.

That very nice club is generally empty on winter afternoons, and it was a big relief to find no one in front of the cozy log

fire. Marge had been most offhand all the way out there, but curled up in the soft cushions of the huge sofa she thawed out.

"Well, you're certainly making them sit up and play Fido," I began. "That was a good name you gave Adam Perkins. I bet it'll be some moons before he pulls any more of his filthy remarks."

"What? 'Ad Nauseam'? Yes, I though that was rather neat myself." And she smiled complacently.

"Yes," I agreed, "you wallop the old nail on the head fairly often. You're on the wrong track, though."

"What's that?" she asked quickly. "My clothes?"

"Far be it from such," I said hastily. "This consistent quaintness is the best bet ever. Keeping the curls was a great hunch, and the crinolines, and floppy hats,

and ribbons—the old 1860 trade-mark is a knock-out. No. I mean some of your gent friends."

She flushed. "Who in particular?"

I gritted my teeth, then I came out with it.

"The Plumber."

She sat back and looked at me quizzically.

"Just why do boys call him that?"

I believe I must have squirmed. How could I set the thing in front of her so that she could see it? It's just that a plumber doesn't seem quite to fit. I couldn't state much very definite against him. Finally I did manage to say, "Oh, I don't know. He's about as sociable as a clam."

"You mean he's a bit too serious for all of you?"

"Well, it's partly that. Conversa-

tionally, he draws a blank every shot."

Marge smiled. "If I recall Mr. Whitman's words, 'To have great poets we must have great audiences, too.' "

"Meaning, I suppose, that everybody but you is too dumb to get any results out of him?"

Margey softened a bit. "No, Larry, dear. But I find he talks extremely well. Surely, you aren't jealous. . . ."

"Jealous!" I yelped. ". . . . oh, let it go. But honestly, Marge, he *is* a plumber. Where's he from? Who knows him? He just seems to pop in every week-end. What does he do?"

Marge smiled again, mysteriously. "He's a relative of the Streeker's . . . . that ought to be sufficient backing. And he's an instructor at the State University."

I paced the floor. "Instructor! Good

night. My pet aversion. What does he instruct in?"

"Literature, I believe."

"An instructor! I always knew there was something awful in his private life. I'll bet he starves all week to get carfare up here."

Marge gave me a queer look. "Yes, he's quite poor. Only makes about two thousand a year. I don't wonder at your scorn."

I knew I had gone too far. "Don't get sore, Marge. Only—look at the ears on him."

Marge laughed scornfully. "There are other vices he has. He writes poetry."

That was too much for me. I exploded. "Poetry! What for? The Police Gazette? Poetry! I suppose that's his drag with you."

I gazed wrathfully at the fire. Silence ensued.

As a matter of fact, I rather liked the Plumber. The few times we had passed words, I felt a something real, a something genuine and absolutely worth-while about him that made his clumsiness only a shell. I really was drawn to him.

But—tell Marge that? When I knew he had to be eliminated? Well, I wasn't quite half-witted; I knew my technique. He would have to be sacrificed. So I kept staring at the fire, as if I was furious, and the Plumber was the most loathsome creature in the universe. Finally I felt a twitch at my coat sleeve. I turned around angrily. But a wild hyena couldn't have resisted that darling little thing, eyeing me wistfully and mischievously.

"Have I made him angry?" she said.

"Go on and lecture me some more."

I had to give in. "All right, Marge, if you will let me clasp your justly famous little hand."

Without a word she put her hand in mine. I did have something else on my mind.

"Listen, Marge. I don't think you ought to go with us out to Bartolini's New Year's Eve."

Marge withdrew her hand. "Just the same, I'm going," she said.

"But Marge, it's the worst joint in town. Back of the yards, and all that sort of stuff. None of the other girls will dare go."

"Won't they?" countered Marge. "Who cares? But they will, I think. Besides . . . ."

"Besides what? Don't you realize what a ticklish time this is? You have a rep to sustain. The Candlestickmakers'

invites are on the fire this very moment."

"What of it?"

"Now, look here, Marge," I pleaded. "I know I'm the last person in the world to take on this virtuous garb, and all that. But I want to see you do the right thing. Lord knows I lost you on account of this beastly game you were bound you were going to play, and—"

Marge interrupted. "Wait a minute, Larry dear, did you say lost?"

"I did."

She put her hand back in mine. "How do you know, Larry?"

I placed her hand gently but finally in her lap. "Don't try to pull that stuff on me, Marge. You know you don't care a darn about me. But I'm all for seeing that you win this game. And the Candlestickmakers' bid is the one acid test, and you know it."

"I suppose it is," she murmured.

"Sure. As it is, you have a good chance of being asked. They can't reasonably leave you out, even if you are under the age limit. It'll be the blue ribbon for you. No younger girl was ever bid before, but you've made such a hit—now don't ruin it."

Marge sat considering. "I suppose the tabbies will all have fits if they find out I went to Bartoloni's."

"You'll lose out. Don't do it. Play it through."

Marge sat up very straight. "I'll play it, all right. I'm going to Bartolini's . . . . and I'll get the bid to the Candlestickmakers', too. The game . . . pooh! As if I couldn't win it!"

"Very well," I said. I stood up. "Let's get out of here."

She pulled me by the coattails. I had to sit down again.

"Larry," she said softly. "You're a

darling to have been so thoughtful. But don't you worry . . . . I know what I'm doing. I do appreciate your looking out for me . . . . I do, Larry, more than you can understand. You . . . . you must care a lot about me."

"I . . . . I do, Marge," I said mournfully. Great Cæsar, how I wanted to kiss her. But I remembered that her motto was "Hands Off!" to every one. Bill had told me only the day before that the one time he tried she hadn't struggled, or been sore . . . . she had yawned! Still . . . .

They say girls always know intuitively when a bird means to start something. My hopes went down to zero when Marge suddenly jumped up, all pep, and danced out, calling back, "Come on! Home, quick!"

What could I do but follow? There was some consolation, though, in this

fact: she snuggled very close and patted my cheek several times on the way back.

That afternoon settled my hash. I succumbed without a struggle. From then on I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't enjoy my liquor any more.

I was in such a love-sick daze that I left the hack out in front of the house, instead of taking it to the garage. When I came out after dinner, I found the blasted radiator was totally frozen up, rendering it thoroughly useless for the next month.

But even that failed to ruin my temper. I was in love. . . . I was in love, and nothing else mattered.

VI

By the end of Christmas vacation, what with teas, matinees, dances and every other known form of indoor and outdoor sport, I was a perfect imitation of the celebrated lilies of the field, at least as to color. But I'll say there's plenty of toil connected with being a "dancing-man," and my head did sufficient spinning. Furthermore, I was so wild about Marge that I couldn't tell, offhand, whether it was my ear or my Frank Brothers' upon which I stood most of the time.

Besides, a crisis was approaching. February was in the offing, and New Haven. On the morning of December thirty-first, Dad summoned me into the library, and gave me the once-over.

Pleasure was not written in every line of his countenance.

"Laurence," he said. Wow! When he starts in with that "Laurence" stuff, I know something tasty is coming.

"Laurence," he repeated, "I can't say that you are a great credit to yourself or to me. Why don't you abandon the idea of going back for a last try at the university?"

I cleared my throat trying to figure what to say.

"You do nothing there but drink and gamble and run wild around New York. Now, if you wish to stay here, I will give you a very good job in my business."

"But . . ." I started in to interrupt.

"I wish to hear no criticisms of soap. It is, as I remarked to Hodgson the other day, at least a good clean business."

While he paused to enjoy this bit of

humor, I forced an appreciative smirk on my face, and said, "I'll think it over, Dad."

"Think it over? Yes, I should rather say you had better. It's a splendid opportunity. Of course, you can go back, as I promised you. But I think you would be wiser to stay here. It's high time you were taking stock of yourself . . . twenty-one years of age, and a disgrace . . . ." and so on, and so on. You know that "high time" dope. At the end of half an hour of this, I promised I'd let him know within two weeks.

All day that proposition kept leaping about in my mind. Yes, I was getting along. Old enough to get engaged, anyway. And if I could only maneuver some sort of promise out of Marge . . . . why Dad would have eight fits of joy if I signed her up. I could go to work, and in a year . . . . I had vivid visions of myself

staggering down the aisle. Margey . . . . Margey . . . wherever I turned I seemed to see her in front of me. I was that bad. I could hardly wait for evening.

VII

We left the dance almost as soon as we got there. As Ed Skeller remarked in a loud voice (nice fellow, Ed; you could always count on him for all the undue publicity possible), "We're going to *do* some drinking." Ed had secured the table so we had to let him come along.

Not another girl would join us. True enough, we only asked Ruth and Martha and one or two others. They willingly pledged themselves to secrecy about the whole matter. But they refused.

"Very well," said Marge, "but I'm not afraid of my reputation; I hope it doesn't hang upon such a slender thread as that."

We were three cars full. My hack was useless, of course, so that Jim easily snagged Marge. He was quite nasty

about my offer to sit on the floor. "If you can't find room with Ed or Bill," he remarked, "you can certainly buy a taxi, can't you?"

No use for me to protest. He had been gazing at Marge very dreamily all evening, and it was perfectly clear that he wanted a private conversation with her. Damn him, the complacency of the brute! He knew he was the most eligible bird in town. Whew . . . . I certainly mopped my brow plentifully from the moment he cruised off with her in his Stutz.

It took only half an hour to get to Bartolini's. Our two cars hove up to-gether, but where were Marge and Jim? We stalled around for ten minutes, but the sounds of revelry were too much for Ed and several others.

We threaded our way through a mass of assembled shoe-clerks and auto salesmen and prominent gunmen, with the

females of their species. Loud hoots from one corner greeted us—"Look at the soup and fishes." . . . Apparently a dinner-coat didn't go so big in these circles. All of us were doused with confetti and snared with streamers. We gathered around a huge table, right next to the music. Eight strong we were, all male. Not so very congenial looking, I suppose, except for Ed and Brock, who had, with great forethought, loaded their hips to the guards. Gale Springer, the cutie who sang for her darling Bartolini on week-days and caroled anthems in a neighboring church on Sundays, tried to break our hearts with several pathetic ballads. Our waiter came loping up and whined, "The teapot or the coffee pot?"

Skeller demanded "Thirty teas"—an order which the waiter almost refused to believe, but a second look at Skeller convinced him of its good faith. Ten tea-

pots were ushered in and placed in the middle of the table. Each exhaled an aroma of Martinis. A teacup was ironically set at each place.

I wasn't having any. And I noticed that Bill, also, turned his cup over. He was fidgeting around, glaring every now and then at his watch. But he had nothing on me. The famous Bar-room Eight broke out into some of the meanest jazz that ever made a foot twitch. I got up to go out after some cigarets. As I left the table, my toe caught in a wire that ran past my chair. I stumbled and almost broke my knee cap. All of which did not contribute much to my gaiety. I cursed electrical arrangements that made such accidents possible. I would willingly have plucked the wire out by the roots and banged Bartolini over the head with it, if I hadn't known that such a deed would short-circuit the lights and cause

even deeper gloom for the rest of the evening.

When I got back to my chair I fumed and fretted . . . . still no Marge and no Jim. Then suddenly there was an extra crash of the drum, the lights were dimmed with only a big spot thrown on the center of the doorway. In a dead silence everybody waited for the advertised event—the entrance of "Queenie" Curtis of the Follies, who was to represent the New and practically unadorned Year.

The door opened . . . . and in popped Marge. Jim marched behind her. Lots of the denizens thought this was the show, and applauded wildy, although several of them looked somewhat disappointed in the fact that Marge was thoroughly clothed in the prettiest crinolinette of all her repertoire. She certainly looked like a million worth of good news. I . . . . and I could see Bill, also, in the same

mood, could willingly have patted Jim's confident face into a pleasing pulp. What had happened? Had he proposed and been accepted? He certainly looked happy over himself. As for Marge, she murmured sweet alibis about "losing their way." And Jim hadn't been there more than about ten times before! My evening was thoroughly bogussed. I suppose they beat a gong twelve times, and sang "Auld Lang Syne," and had the New Year enter, and all that. It flew entirely over my head. I couldn't have enjoyed but one event . . . . and the criminal code saved Jim from that.

The plumber seemed rather dazed at all the proceedings. He looked a bit bored, though polite. While Marge was dancing and some of the others were out getting extra stimulation at the bar, he draped himself on the seat next me, and started talking about writing. I felt the

subject was somewhat out of place, until he remarked that the scene would make a good background for a popular type of short story. "The kind, I'm sorry to say, that I can't do," he finished.

I muttered something about "too bad," and gazed bitterly at the frolic around us. The din resembled a combination of Ringling's Circus and a suffrage meeting. Ed Skeller was performing a *pas seul* in the middle of the floor, just to show that he was at home in any dump. His turn was a very life-like imitation of Frisco, and he was showered with coins which he presented to the musicians.

Marge came back to the table, and sat demurely chatting with Bill, who was making up for lost time by using his most earnest vampings . . . and evidently with success, for Marge laughed delightedly, and patted his hand once, which raised my temperature to one hundred and

seven. How Marge always kept such pep I don't know, for even on so gala an occasion she would not touch a drop of hooch, but sipped away at a sarsaparilla. Jim was what I concentrated most of my attention upon; he sat, pleasantly superior, at the other side of the table. He seemed to indicate that he knew a thing or two that he wasn't telling, and every so often he favored Marge with a possessive glance.

"Yes, I just sold a story to *The Century*," I suddenly discovered the Plumber was saying in a most ordinary tone of voice. I leaped to attention.

"*You* did!" I answered, before I realized how incredulous I sounded. Then quick recovery, "Any chance for movie rights?"

The Plumber studied the table. "No," he said slowly, "I don't believe I write that sort of thing."

I was feeling so low I couldn't help being a bit sarcastic. "Oh, going to put Wells and Galsworthy out of business, eh? Well, there's wads of cash in the movies."

He looked really hurt. "Yes, I know it. I'm a bit of a fool some ways, I guess. But you see, Baker . . . oh, I don't know. You said you were going to try writing some time. And I'm sure you'll do very good, bright things that will hit the public. Of course, you'll make money, too. But for myself—oh, well, don't think I'm a prig, but I'd rather put all I have into my stories, and let the money end go for a while. Several critics have said fairly decent things about my style and characterization." His eyes half closed, and I swear from that minute on, I liked him.

I was just on the edge of telling him

that I could see his viewpoint, when the floor cleared, and the band, to which Ed Skeller had been whispering, opened up on some old-fashioned music. Bill dragged Marge to the middle of the place, and the two of them did a syncopated minuet that caused such applause I thought the roof was going to blow off. Some stunt! And the way Marge, simply shining with happiness and mischief looked at Bill. . . .

Some Broadway manager, exiled in Dearborn over the holidays, insisted on being introduced to Marge.

"Say, girlie," he pleaded with her, "I'll make you one swell offer if you'll take this young man here, and pull that minuet gag in my new rev-view!"

Margey opened her eyes very wide, and said, "Oh, I really couldn't."

"Why, girlie," persisted the manager,

"you'd knock 'em cold turkey with that cute rig . . . and you such a lady. The old White Lights . . ."

"Oh, sir," interrupted Marge, "you are very flattering. But I hardly think my father would approve."

The manager cast his hands despairingly into the air, and walked away wagging his head in sorrow. Dancing, if you can call it that, broke out again, wild and furious. Skeller, by that time in a maudlin state, was biting chunks out of his glass and trying to chew them.

Suddenly there was a terrific hubbub at the door, and the music stopped like a caught breath. Three men walked calmly into the room, and one yelled, "Take your seats!"

A dead silence. A scream from the corner opposite us. Some one whispered hoarsely, "Raided, by God!"

I heard a nervous hiccup. Skeller had

got down on all fours, and was attempting to crawl behind a screen back of us. One of the detectives yanked a gun out of his pocket. "Get back there you!" Skeller flopped back into his chair.

I gave a quick glance at Marge. Her eyes were big with fright, but she was plucky as they make them. She looked at me . . . at me, I tell you . . . appealingly. I winked reassuringly.

I slid my hand carefully into my pocket and clutched my penknife. I pressed the spring, and felt the blade fly out. I moved my shoe around until I touched the electric light wire beneath my chair.

There was a crash on the other side of the room. A girl had fainted. The three detectives spun around at the noise. I pulled out the knife, and lunged the blade into the wire-cord. There was a hiss and a flash as the fuses blew. All the lights were doused.

A roar of confusion . . . panic. A wild yelp, "Who the—!". . . Two electric torches stabbing the blackness. I grabbed Marge, and pulled her behind the screen. I could hear one of the detectives stumbling toward us. We made a sudden dash. He grappled me, and I tripped him. His gun went off close to my ear.

I flung myself against the "Ladies Entrance" door. It flew open. We made time around the corner. Fine fish, those inspectors, not to surround the place! A taxi was steaming up the street. I shouted drunkenly at it. Marge had her wrap, but I was sacrificing very gladly a brand new hat and coat, luckily without identifying marks. I staggered very carefully to the curb. Just as I had hoped, the grinning driver thought we had been bounced out on account of my hilarious condition.

In another second we had popped inside. Marge begged the driver to make all possible speed. He was more than obliging. I flashed a look back at the joint. It was altogether dark, but as we flew around the corner two men popped out of it accompanied by much noise! Marge suddenly went limp, and commenced to cry.

I put my arm around her, and said nothing. This was probably the best thing I could have done. We had almost reached the bridge before she wiped her eyes and looked at me with, I am gratified to say, a great deal of new affection.

"Oh, Larry dearest, you were wonderful."

I had rather an idea that I had pulled some fairly smooth stuff in getting out of that fracas. But of course I had to be modest.

"Not a bit," I said, "but I hope those others didn't get nabbed."

Margey looked out of the window for a few seconds. Then she turned to me with a very sweet look. "Larry, you and I always get along together so wonderfully!"

Now this was not altogether true, but I was certainly glad not to contradict her. Now was the time if ever. I held her just a little closer, and began to stutter out my small speech.

I warmed up to it after the first few sentences. I told her I wanted to cut out my wild ways, and all that sort of rot. I went enthusiastically into details about the proposition Dad had made that morning.

And at the end I said, "Margey, you're the only person in the world who can help me to change from a bum. What do you say we sign up?"

Marge sat thinking. Then, most gently she said, "But I don't want to get married yet. Not for a long time . . . . At least I don't think I do."

I interposed hastily. "Not get married, Marge. Just get signed. I could go to work with all the gusto in the world, if I knew I had just a small string on you. What do you say?"

Marge looked out of the window again, and talked over her shoulder. "But I'm so young. And you are, too. And I'm having such a good time, playing this game. Oh, Larry . . . . if this raid gets out . . . . do you suppose it will ruin things?"

I was annoyed to see the question slipping away. "Marge," I urged, "forget the old game. Let's be engaged."

Marge continued studying the streets. Then she turned and looked at me. "Larry, I ought not to tell . . . . but . . . .

Bill and Jim both asked me the same thing to-night.

I groaned. "I thought so!" I guess I shouted. "You didn't . . . ?" And the rest of the words stuck in my throat.

Marge squeezed my hand. "No, Larry, I didn't. I told them just what I'm going to tell you now . . . Wait. I have to think things over. And I want to win the game first. People used to laugh at me . . . . called me the 'Tanglefoot Kid.' The girls used to be sorry for me . . . ."

"Oh, Margey," I interrupted, "what's it all worth?"

But just then the taxi pulled up in front of Marge's. I swallowed several bitter curses, paid the driver who went cheerfully off, and I stood bareheaded on the doorstep.

"That's all the answer I can have?"

Margey pulled my head down and whispered in my ear. "You've been a

darling always, Larry. I have so much to think over. Give me time. Oh, if that raid only doesn't get out! Anyway .... Close your eyes, and put your hands behind you."

I followed instructions. I heard her key click in the lock. Then something soft and fluttery, like a combined flower and butterfly brushed my lips.

I made a grab for her. But she slipped away, and stood safely inside the glass door, blowing me another and most unsatisfactory kiss.

However, I'll say I trod the oft-mentioned air all the three blocks to my place. As I entered the door, I noted that the handy little thermometer registered two above zero. And just then I discovered I was shivering from head to foot.

My head felt as if a race riot was coming off inside it.

VIII

HERE passes one full week during which I nursed a fine case of grippe. Not flu . . . . nothing so fashionable . . . . just good old-style hellish grippe.

The calendar, when I finally sat up to beef tea, said it was a week. But it was all one long nightmare to me. I had a slick variety of deliriums . . . . or deliria, whichever the case may be . . . . in some of which I saw Marge stepping down a church aisle with Bill on one side and Jim on the other . . . and myself chasing them with wedding presents in the shape of cartons of Baker's Family Soap . . . that sort of thing.

There were flowers in the room. "From Margey . . . . To dearest Larry." I called for the New Year's morning pa-

pers. They had all been thrown out days before. Dad and the Mater came in for a few minutes, and I pretended sound slumber. I didn't want to bicker about that party with them while I was in my subdued condition. What the deuce had happened to the rest of the gang that night? And were we in Dutch or not? The nurse, a dumb-looking brute of some fifty summers, always got so kittenish when I talked to her, that I couldn't bear to attempt wheedling any news out of her.

When the beef tea was consumed, I hit on a good hunch. I gave the Dumbduck Brock's phone number, and asked her to get him over. She protested, but I howled at her like a wounded thing, and she finally gave in.

Luckily Brock was there. That evening he leaped into my room, and stood grinning at me.

"Some protracted hangover," he said.

"Shut up," I answered. "Look here, how about that raid?"

"We bribed our way out. Cost me a pretty penny."

"But didn't we get into print?"

"Bartolini did . . . nobody else."

"Then it's all hushed up?"

Brock sat down on the edge of the bed. "That poor idiot Skeller . . . he couldn't keep his face shut. The tale of Marge's dance and offer from the manager is spread all over town."

"Good Lord," I remarked, "and the old hens . . . . are they on?"

Brock laughed sardonically. "Can you imagine all these jealous little rats of girls not piping forth to their mamas, now that they have something on Marge?"

I groaned. "I suppose she is ruined for the Candlestickmakers'."

Brock nodded his head. "I fear as

much. Although Marge certainly handed a lot of them the most wonderful Pink Minnie in the world yesterday at the Armstrongs' tea."

"Pink Minnie," I may say, is a polite name for hot air. The sort of thing you say to a hostess when the party's been a complete washout. . . . "I had the *best* time. . . . Oh, honestly Mrs. Gish, I don't know *when* I've enjoyed myself so much!" Or when they haul in a yelping brat and enthuse about "Well, well, that *is* a baby . . . . woof, woof!"

"And Marge got away with it?"

Brock scratched his head. "Well, I tell you. Most of them think Marge was a darling little innocent who was lured there by us rough boys. I'm not considered much of a chaperon, evidently. Just the same, there are three or four who seem to be sure that Marge is a complete minx, or whatever it is."

IX

BEFORE he left, Brock convinced me of the worst. So far as I could make out, Marge might just as well kiss the Candlestickmakers good-bye; and all her fine game was shot to pieces.

Wasn't that a shame? Poor little Marge. She had set her heart on that badge of success. Now she'd have to start all over again, probably, to live down that party. And I wouldn't dare mention marrying me, for months. She'd probably be in no sympathetic mood for any tender stuff whatever.

I called for paper and pen, and tried to write her a letter. But I couldn't make my thoughts behave. Everthing I wrote was slushy. I gave it up, and went to sleep, vowing I'd get out of that beastly

bed the next day and see her, if I relapsed into double pneumonia.

I awoke at noon or thereabouts. The house was still, and I gathered that the Mater had long since departed for shopping. Despite the protests of the Dumbduck, I dressed and tottered down to luncheon. Luckily nobody came home. Alma handed me two notes. The one from Dad I opened first. It informed me that he wished to have a heart-to-heart talk with me as soon as I felt strong enough.

The other was in Marge's handwriting. I opened it, shaking all over. I read that she did hope that her darling Larry was all right by this time, because he simply *must* come over that very afternoon *without fail.* She had the most important thing in the world to tell him!

To say that I was excited would be understating it two miles. I tossed toast

all over the table-cloth. What could it be—this "most important thing in the world?"

I wobbled upstairs and spent one entire hour reclothing myself in the most gorgeous garb I possessed. All the while I kept making guesses. I called Marge on the phone. The maid said she was out, but that if Mr. Larry called up, to tell him that he was expected at three sharp.

Little I fretted about the razzing I knew Dad had stored up for me. If Marge cared that was enough. I felt violently weak and excited, if you can be those things all at once. But I managed to stagger over the intervening blocks, and as the grandfather clock in the corner tolled three, I flopped down on a huge sofa in Marge's sitting-room.

Almost immediately I heard her footsteps dashing down the stairs, and in she

burst, looking like peaches and cream, and fully clothed for going out. She dropped a small suitcase she was carrying and ran over to me.

"Larry! You angel! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

She seized both of my hands. I tried to pull her down beside me, because I was sure now that I could kiss her by every right.

But she danced away from me, and fished something out of her pocket, which she waved around in the air.

"Wait! Wait! See what I have here! The game . . . . Larry . . . . the game! And she tossed the envelope to me.

"Read it!" she insisted, and ran over to the piano, which she pounded wildly and at random.

"Hell's great yelping bells!" I thought to myself, as I yanked the enclosure out. So this was what all the excite-

ment was about! Stung again.

I read: The Twelve Merry Candlestickmakers request the honor of Miss Margey Ransom's presence on the evening of January twenty-third at their Work-shop in the Hotel Senate. Miss Ransom is further requested to be prepared for the office of leading the Grand March."

I gave a heartfelt yell.

"Margey! Absolutely swell! One thousand bouquets! You get the cardboard Victory Arch!"

She banged down the piano-cover, and stood up. Then she walked slowly over toward me, very thoughtfully.

"Yes, Larry. I guess I've won, haven't I?"

"Won! I should say you have! Not only urged, but to lead the blooming show."

Margey halted in front of me, and

said, "Sit down, Larry. There's something else. That isn't all. I . . . I . . ."

She sat down at the other end of the sofa. "Stay there, Larry. Promise not to move until I'm all through talking. Promise?"

I folded my hands in my lap. "Go ahead," I said.

She sighed a little. "Well, Larry . . . I'm not going to that party."

I jumped. "What!"

"Sit down. No Larry, I won't be here by the time it comes off."

"Honestly, Marge? Not going to it."

"No, Larry. . . . You see. . . . Well . . . . You asked me to marry you didn't you? . . . Sit where you are. . . . Please, Larry, let me go on. You said you wanted me to help you not be a bum any more. I want you to try to do something with yourself. . . . I'm going to—but not the way you think."

I got to my feet.

"Margey! . . ."

"Larry! Let me finish! There's lots more. You know Bill and Jim asked me also."

"Damn!"

"All right, Larry dear, only you must hear the rest. Now, I've thought and thought and thought, these last few days. First, about the game. Before I started playing I was real. I loved reading, and my sculping, and music, and all those things that matter. Then I changed. I 'got some dope,' as Brock said. It wasn't so much the others . . . it was myself I wanted to show that I could play around as well as anyone. . . . And now I've got what I have been working for . . . and I don't want it."

"Margey, dearest!" I interrupted, "I told you all along it wasn't worth it."

Margey nodded. "I know, Larry.

You've been the most wonderful person there ever was. . . . And now . . . I'm going back to the things that mean something. I want to share them with someone who understands. Congenial and all. I'm going to get married."

I arose and went over to her, put my arms around her. My heart was brimming over with happiness. "Margey—" that was all I could say.

She pushed me gently away. "Please, Larry. Just let me finish. I want you to see it all."

I moved back a foot or so from her, giving my eyes one thrill after another as I kept them glued on her.

"I looked at it from every possible angle. Bill—he's sweet, but he's only an adorable parlor-snake, after all. Jim—if I married him I'd run Dearborn after awhile. . . . He's a gentleman through and through. And he's so marvelous look-

ing, and all that. But—that's not what I want, either. I—I don't love either of them. I'm in love, Larry, and he's somebody who's congenial always, and . . ."

"Margey . . . dearest."

"Wait, Larry. He hasn't any money of his own, at all. I'll have to start in at the bottom with him, and go without lots of things. Dad is furious . . . says I'll never get one cent. . . ."

I couldn't hold back any longer. I took Margey in my arms.

"But you're going to marry me, just the same, aren't you?"

Margey trembled against me. She put her face down on my lapel. She was crying, softly.

"Oh, Larry . . . you've been so dear. . . . I've tried so hard to tell you what I've just got to . . . do you care so much for me?"

"You know I do, Marge."

"Oh, Larry. . . . I have been square with you, haven't I? Oh," and she looked up at me with a sad little smile, "If I could only marry both of you!"

The light at last began to sift through the ivory of my dome. "Both of us! Marge!"

"Oh, Larry, will you hate me forever and ever? I've messed things up so horribly! Everything I've said has been trying to tell you the truth, and yet not hurt you. I should have come straight out with it—and yet I just couldn't!"

I led Margey gently back to the sofa, and made her sit down. "Marge, dear, don't be afraid. I'm not altogether soft, I hope. It's my fault, anyway; I took too much for granted. I should have known I wasn't good enough—"

Marge interrupted me immediately. "You are, Larry—don't you dare say you aren't! Don't you think I can see the

real you, under all that flippancy, and drinking, and what other people think is you? Other people! What do they matter!"

"No, Marge," I answered, "You're too darn good for me, and you know it. I knew it, too, all along. Only I hoped I had more luck than sense. See? . . . Who is it? The Plumber?"

Marge nodded her head.

I took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Good for you, Marge. He's a good egg. All the nasty things I said about him—just jealousy. He's worth it."

Marge put both hands over mine. "Oh, Larry you make me feel so proud. You—you're a man, Larry!"

My voice was husky. "Oh, nix, nix, Marge. . . . I was afraid he was it . . . now I'm glad . . . he's got the stuff. . . . You know. . . . I feel . . . please don't think I'm conceited, but . . . there's a

lot about him that's something like me, or, I mean. . . ."

"Larry! That's it! That's what made me first like him. . . . He's . . . he's the way you're going to be . . . soon . . . in a year or two . . ."

"When I grow up, you mean? Oh, that's what you mean, and you're absolutely right. That is—I hope so. These other birds—playing around, playing around. Me, too. Playing around. But I'm through. I'm a kid. But I'm growing up. You did it, Marge."

Marge started crying again. "Oh, Larry, if you only knew how it hurts me. I wish I could marry you. There's lots of things about you that are so fine—even he hasn't got them. And you've grown so, these last few months. Have I helped? Have I, honestly?"

"You bet your life you have."

"It's only a little of what I owe you,

then. I don't suppose anybody in the world ever had a friend as true as you are. If he hadn't come along . . . . you were the only one, up to that time . . . nobody else mattered, even if I did play tricks on you for a while . . . but they weren't mean tricks, only fooling . . . . but he did come, and there was some of you about him, and something else, I can't explain what it is, I don't need to, do I? and . . . it . . . it just happened. And all the time I cared for you, too. And I thought and thought and thought . . . and I had to decide . . . and now . . . ."

I got up from the sofa, and grabbed her arm. "Not another word, Marge . . . . . I only hope . . . . I hope you've got a twin sister somewhere lurking around, that'll pop up sometime. . . . . When I'm a real man. See? Forget it. . . . . Now . . . . Where's your good old Plumber?"

Margey jumped up, smiled crookedly at me, on account of the nick-name. "Waiting at the drug store. License and everything . . . Poor old Dad . . . But it can't be helped. I always said that when the real thing came along . . . ."

"All right, Marge. Come on. I'll be witness . . . . may I?"

Marge came up to me, put both arms around my neck, and kissed me, hard. "Larry, you darling!"

And so we sneaked out to the drug store, and there he was, and I got a chance at last to tell that bird what I had always really thought about him, only being so jealous had kept me from it.

He looked me right in the eye, and I want to tell you I can still feel that thrill that went up and down my spine from seeing real, unadulterated, frank friendship, without kidding, without any Pink Minnie, in another guy's face.

Well, that's how Margey played the Game.

A year has gone by, and the gang hasn't quit panning her yet for an eighteen-karat fool. "Throwing herself away," and all that.

Who cares? There's three people who know whether she won or not—myself —and my two best friends, Margey and the Plumber; the latter, as you can see by reviews appearing just now, "one of the most important novelists of the younger generation."

THE END